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TAGS: PREL PTER CVIS SY IS

SUBJECT: LEBANON: JUMBLATT WANTS HARIRI TO OPEN HIS WALLET

Classified By: Jeffrey D. Feltman, Ambassador. Reason: 1.4(d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C/NF) Ambassador Feltman, poloff, and pol FSN shared a subdued lunch with Druze chieftain Walid Jumblatt on 8/19 at his Moukhtara manse in the Shouf Mountains. Jumblatt said the government needs to get moving on the reconstruction effort, and that Saad Hariri can help by doling out his vast fortune to help pay for the effort and win hearts and minds, a la Hizballah. Remarking that Lebanon faces a "bleak future" if Nasrallah is able to consolidate his "victory" over Israel, Jumblatt fears the flight of the bourgeoisie -- especially Christians -- out of Lebanon, tipping the confessional balance. Jumblatt urged that the March 14 movement should find a way to split Parliamentary Speaker Nabih Berri away from his Hizballah coreligionists in order to weaken Hizballah's hand, and also to help topple Hizballah-sympathizing President Emile Lahoud (but only after the approval of the Hariri tribunal in the current cabinet). Never one to back a weaker party for long -- a strategy that ensures the disproportionate political influence of his tiny Druze community in Lebanon -- Jumblatt does not think Saad Hariri yet displays the political and public relations acumen of his father Rafiq. Jumblatt pushed for the swift reopening of the airports, but acknowledged that the international community's valid concerns about monitoring are well-founded.

¶2. (C/NF) Discussing security within Lebanon, Jumblatt said he received a warning from Syrian ex-Vice President Abdel Halim Khaddam that he and PM Siniora should "be careful." He also has it on authority from a Syrian intelligence source that his Druze rival Wiam Wahhab is working closely with Damascus. Jumblatt said he plans to travel to Jordan on Monday 8/20, and then onward to France for a socialist party congress, before returning to Lebanon on Saturday 8/25. Saying he hopes to travel to the U.S. in a few months, Jumblatt asked the Ambassador if there is any possibility of getting a further waiver of his visa ineligibility. Looking ahead with hopeful anticipation to his retirement someday (if indeed Druze feudal lords ever truly retire), Jumblatt said he believes his oldest son Taimur will be prepared to assume the mantle, though he complained that his younger son Arslan, a kind of Druse Generation Y'er, "doesn't care a damn about any of this." END SUMMARY.

"200 MILLION DOLLARS IS PEANUTS"

¶3. (C/NF) Seated in his reception room replete with a large brass Buddha, a Damascene ceiling (with Star of David motif), and hanging Esfahan lanterns, and with his Chinese fighting dog 'Oscar' gnawing at a bone in the corner, Jumblatt told the Ambassador that the GOL has to move fast in order to beat Hizballah on the reconstruction effort. Noting that PM Siniora had done a good job during the war with Israel, Jumblatt complained that "Siniora needs more guts" in handling the rebuilding effort. Even though his life is under threat, Jumblatt counselled, Siniora needs to go together with Nabih Berri and show his face in the destroyed southern suburbs. He also needs to manage the Cabinet to get it to decide on a rebuilding plan. "He needs to stand up and say, 'I am the Prime Minister of Lebanon.'"

¶4. (C/NF) Suggesting that he cares more for moving money than for public accountability that governments and donors usually require, Jumblatt recommended that reconstruction money be channelled through the Berri-controlled Council for the South and the Druze-controlled Fund for the Displaced (Comment. Based on their record in the post-civil war period, neither of these is considered a paragon of financial regularity. End Comment). Noting that "houses are much more important than bridges," Jumblatt said that the government needs to rebuild at least half of the houses in the Beirut suburbs and the South, but has only a year to do so before the Hizballah machine accomplishes the task first. The question, of course, is getting the money to do so. The Iranians seem to have an inexhaustible supply of cash, and with no government bureaucracy or accountability mechanism, can dole it out as they please (Note. Jumblatt said that some of the Shi'a IDPs who stayed up in the Shouf during the

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war were well-off and had "Range Rovers full of cash" which they said they could get easily on open credit from the Bank Saderat Iran. End Note).

¶5. (C/NF) Making a rough calculation, Jumblatt said that 15,000 housing units need to be rebuilt which, at \$12,000 per unit, comes to \$180,000,000. (Others have estimated about \$40,000 per unit.) Rounding up, Jumblatt declared, "200 million! It's peanuts, pocket money for the Hariri family!" Jumblatt said that Saad Hariri needs to start spending his massive fortune as his late father, Rafiq, had done. Noting that Hizballah is handing out money for rebuilding even in the heavily-Sunni northern city of Akkar and also that 150,000 Sunni IDPs had fled their homes in the Biqa' valley for Syria, where they had been well-treated, Jumblatt said that Saad needs to shore up his support in the Lebanese Sunni hinterlands before these Sunnis start switching their allegiance to the pro-Syria cause. "We don't need democracy now," said Jumblatt; "We need money." Jumblatt lamented that while Saad had finally supplied him with \$1 million last week, he said that, "This is peanuts. I can spend it in two to three months." (Note: Jumblatt has told us before that Rafiq Hariri provided Jumblatt with about \$3 million a year for Druse patronage, which probably explain Jumblatt's ingratitute. End Note.)

¶6. (C/NF) Apart from financial concerns, Jumblatt is also clearly not enamoured of Saad's abilities as a political tactician. Noting that "Saad's a nice guy," -- which, in the world of Lebanese politics, is not a compliment -- Jumblatt remarked that Saad's 8/17 speech was "not very good" and that the whole atmosphere surrounding Saad, including his Saudi-styled "royal entourage," is rather off-putting for Lebanese. Later in the conversation, after he had put down a couple glasses of his own Kefraya wine, Jumblatt shook his head in dismay and said, "The big problem is Saad. What can I do?" Jumblatt hopes Saad can take more of a positive leadership role and, instead of dwelling on the past and speaking in grand-sounding maxims against Syria, start making decisions and doling out the funds.

CONFESSONAL BALANCE

¶ 7. (C/NF) Estimating that non-Palestinian Sunnis in Lebanon still outnumber Shi'a by a slim number, Jumblatt worries that the growing Shi'a community is gradually becoming "less Arab and less Lebanese, and more Persian." He predicts that Sunni preeminence in Lebanon will slowly shift toward the Shi'a, with Iran making ever greater inroads. The Christians, bereft of any unifying political leadership and dominated by an erratic ex-General (Aoun) who supports Hizballah's right to bear arms, will begin to sell their land and leave Lebanon, depriving Lebanon of its primary "bourgeoisie" sector. The tiny Druze community, whom Jumblatt described as the "Last of the Mohicans," will be forced to deal with this changing confessional balance, meaning they might have to switch sides to survive.

KEEPING THE SHI'A LEBANESE

¶ 8. (C/NF) According to Jumblatt, all the non-Shi'a religious groups, particularly the Christians, need to have some confidence that this Iranian-inspired Shi'ite power can be checked. On the regional level, Jumblatt said that the solution is to "make Syria Sunni," blocking Iran's primary point of access to Lebanon while satisfying the other Sunni states in the region. He noted that Bashar al-Asad's belligerent 8/15 speech attacking Lebanon's internal integrity was like "a gift", adding, "Thank God Bashar's so stupid. Even the people of Hizballah were annoyed with him." Within Lebanon, Jumblatt said that the moderate Shi'a element must be nurtured and split off from its reliance on Hizballah patronage. Jumblatt said that this process should begin with Speaker Berri, leader of the much-diminished secular Shi'a Amal party, who can play a key role in moderating the Shi'a if he can be enticed out of the Hizballah fold. (Like others, Jumblatt has no good ideas of how this can be done, other than channeling lots of money through the Berri-controlled Council for the South.)

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LAHOUD/TRIBUNAL

¶ 9. (C/NF) As to whether President Lahoud can be deposed, thereby removing one of Hizballah's primary protectors, Jumblatt said that this would depend on whether Speaker Berri sees it in his best interests or not, since the addition of Berri's Amal bloc to the March 14 deputies would allow for the necessary 2/3 of votes in Parliament needed to remove Lahoud. However, Jumblatt would not support forming a national unity government in exchange for Berri's support for Lahoud's ouster, at least not yet: Jumblatt argued that it is far more important that March 14 maintain its current majority in Parliament and the Cabinet in order to press for the tribunal to try suspects in the Hariri assassination. Jumblatt believes that a threat from March 14 to remove Berri from the Speakership when he is due for renewal next summer would be counter-productive and would drive Berri further into the arms of Hizballah. "We won't threaten Berri. The Shi'a will band together."

UNSCR 1701 IMPLEMENTATION

¶ 10. (C/NF) Jumblatt remarked that the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) deployment is going well, and that the army had received a warm reception in the Christian and Sunni areas of the South. However, the mood upon the LAF's arrival in the Shi'a town of Qana was much "cooler." Jumblatt also does not approve of LAF chief Michel Sleiman's order that the LAF deploy "next to the resistance," and has little trust in Defense Minister Elias Murr.

¶11. (C/NF) Jumblatt also pressed for the airport to be reopened. The Ambassador responded that more must first be done to reassure the international community that there is an effective mechanism in place to block arms smuggling. Jumblatt seemed to understand these concerns, adding that Yasser Mahmoud, the Druze who has recently been put in charge of airport security, is "nice and honest, but not effective." He also noted that the Surete Generale, considered to be pro-Syrian, is still in charge of immigration at the airport.

SECURITY CONCERNS

¶12. (C/NF) Jumblatt said that he had been in touch with a source close to Syrian intelligence, who warned him to "watch out" for his Druze rival, Wiam Wahhab, who has apparently been working closely with the Syrians. Also, Syrian ex-VP Abdul Halim Khaddam called him from Paris to say that he and PM Siniora should be careful. Saying he plans to travel to France next week to attend a socialist party gathering in La Rochelle, Jumblatt said that a French intelligence contact told him that Asif Shawkat, director of Syrian intelligence, visited Paris within the past month and met with French officials.

FUTURE PLANS

¶13. (C/NF) Remarking that he hopes to travel to the U.S. once things have settled down in Lebanon, Jumblatt asked if he could get a renewed waiver of his visa ineligibility (he received an initial waiver in February 2005, for 6 months). Looking further ahead, "Walid Beyk" believes his elder son Taimur will be prepared to assume the leadership of the Lebanese Druze community whenever Jumblatt decides to "retire and get my green card." Emitting a low sigh and rubbing his bald head, Jumblatt worried though that his 'Generation Y' younger son, Arslan, is less enthralled by the whole Druze feudal ethos (of course, Jumblatt himself was a motorcycle-riding hippy when he was suddenly thrust into the Druze leadership following his father Kamal's assassination in 1977).

COMMENT

¶14. (C/NF) A true leader whatever one may think of him, the curiously (if unconventionally) charismatic Jumblatt has for years played a clever political game to maintain the

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relevance of the tiny Druze community in Lebanon. Officially listed as 7-8 percent of the population, and apportioned power as such, it is believed the Druze today make up less than 5 percent of Lebanon's population. This has meant that Druze allegiance has often switched very quickly from one team to another, as the Druse try to stay on the winning side to protect themselves. Jumblatt's concerns about the weak leadership (and tight-fistedness) of the Sunnis under Saad and the lack of unity of the Maronites are in stark contrast to his assessment of the well-funded, well-organized Shi'a machine. While we don't think Jumblatt would easily jump back into the pro-Syria camp, nor that Syria would want him back, he must now be considering whether he is still backing the right horse -- or, rather, is still being backed by the right horse. We did not see signs that he is wavering yet, but he worry that he might -- not to save his own skin at this point, as he seems to realize that Syria will never forgive him, but to maintain the importance of the Druse community in Lebanon and the leadership position of the Jumblatt dynasty.

FELTMAN